



Engelei

Part 17

Jalkeli & Bodhchandra Maharaj



Sana Konung (Palace) with a tattered flag, November 24, 2013.
Rajput architectural style Palace completed on November 14, 1910.
Boy in front (R) my grandchild Aryaman Lairenjam.

Today is January 1, 2021. Two years have passed since the outbreak of the Covid Pandemic. This New Year's Day does not seem to herald a happy and prosperous new year. We had no cause to celebrate the New Year's Eve either. December was normally, the month for parties. Yet, all traditional New Year celebrations were cancelled as friends and relatives were dropping like flies.

New Year's Day or January 1, the first day of the year in the modern Gregorian (Civil or solar) calendar, begins the year at or near the

northern winter solstice. This is the day with the shortest period of sunlight and therefore with the longest night.

In certain cultures that follow lunar calendar, such as the Meitei New year (*Shajibu Nongma panba*), falls on different dates, because the first day of the lunar month begins during the New Moon whose appearance varies slightly every year. That is why the date of Eid falls on different dates every year.

Lunar New Year is particularly celebrated in the East and South Asian countries. Traditionally, a New Year's Day is a day of celebration, calling one's friends and relatives, and making New Year resolutions. The Covid Virus has literally put a stop to all that.

'All saints can do miracles, but few can keep a hotel', wrote Mark Twain humorously. Doctors can work wonders but are unable to keep the Covid virus at bay. Notwithstanding, all is not lost. There is now a flicker of light at the end of the tunnel as preventive vaccines against the virus are beginning to roll out. It remains to be seen how effective they are.

'Mankind cannot bear much reality', as TS Elliot sharply reminded us. Many people find it hard to accept the reality of the Corona Virus (SARS-CoV-2). Many are refusing to be vaccinated or to wear face masks. These people say the Covid virus is a hoax. Many people are marching in London protesting the lockdown.

People do not realise that you may not get ill with the virus, but you can carry the virus without you knowing and spread to other people.

I am among the first batch to be vaccinated because of my age. As a doctor I find it hard to believe the standpoint of these dissenters. It may be that they think it is not their duty, when duty is defined as what one expects from others and not what one does oneself (*Oscar Wilde, A Woman of No Importance*).

For me, as the sky glimmers again with some streaks of day light delivering rays of joyful sunshine, bringing out the happy hormone of

serotonin in my blood, I want to record for posterity my observation of a Vaishnavite festival of Jalkeli (water game) that I saw at the Mandab of Govindaji Temple at Konung (Palace) when I was 8 or 9 years old. This is linked to a short account of Maharaj Bodhchandra who lived in this palace as the last king. I have a lot of compassion for Maharaj Bodhchandra.

Meiteis tended to cavort in various pastimes. This premise is because as there was scarcity of jobs, they had a lot of spare time for pandering in frivolities. The celebration of Jalkeli is such an avocation. It is based on the mythological pastime of Radha, Krishna, and Gopis, frolicking in water.

As newly converted Hindus, Meiteis were genuinely more committed to religion as is seen with the 'born again' Meitei Sanamahists with the celebration of 'Ima Imoinu' and Lai Harauba. Ima Imoinu is a Meitei mythology that I never heard of until a few years ago.

Mythology is part of every religion. Religious stories are part of Holy Scriptures that involve the creation of the world as in Meitei Lai Harauba.



Jalkeli Nupipala at the Govindaji Mandab in Imphal



Govindajee Temple Mandab at the Palace, Imphal
Boy (L)front: My grandson Aryaman Lairenjam

The memory of the Jalkeli festival awakens in me a wishful nostalgia about a pastoral Manipur, way back seventy years ago. My excitement is not about Jalkeli itself, but for my first glimpse of the Sana Konung –

the Golden Palace and its splendour, during the last year of Maharaja Churachand who died in November 1941 in Navdeep.

I was a little boy when my sister-in-law Ibemhal took me to the Palace Mandab of Govindaji Temple where she went to take part in the festival. She was a *leima*- a royal descendent, and as such, she was asked to take part in this Jalkeli festival. There are two main dynasties of Meitei kings: (1) Narasingh lineage of Ningthouja dynasty [r.1844-1850 CE] and (2) Bhagyachandra lineage (r.1762-1799 CE). Also known as the House of Karta. Jalkeli was introduced by Raja Narasingh in 1845.



Irengbam O' Ibemhal Devi.

Bhagyachandra Maharaj went on a pilgrimage to Navdeep with his daughter Bimbati Devi who was a great devotee of Krishna. He built the Temple and Mandab of Govinda that are still in existence.



Guest house by the Manipuri Temple In Navdeep when I visited the place with my nephew Dr Imoba in 1914.

Meidingu Charairongba had 4 wives and 5 sons: Pamheiba was his first son and heir to the throne. All the descendants of Charairongba are Rajkumars and Rajkumaris (Sana). All the offspring of the Rajkumaris are known as Leima. As my sister-in-law Ibemhal was a leima, the royal women felt she had a duty to perform.



Lavatory, donated and constructed by my brother Gokulchandra by the side of the Temple in Navdeep, a few years earlier.

Churachand was the son of Chaobiyaima Maikhumbi and Lalitamanjuri Devi *and* was the great grandson of Maharaja Narasingh. He and his lineage were very keen on this festival. He was born on April 15, 1885. He had tuberculosis as had his two daughters. He went to die in Navdeep. (Holy place for followers of Gauria Vaishnav religion) on November 6, 1941, Friday the 18th day of *Hiyanggei* in Manipuri calendar (Cheitharol Kumbaba, Manipur State Archives 2013 p935).

The Palace was built for Raja Churachand by the British, in time for his return from Mayo College in Ajmer and a stint at the Military Academy in Dehradun. It was completed on November 24 1901. It was built in Rajput architectural style as Meitei kings were Hindus and had similar Rajput surnames and attire.

One day in 1941, my father Irengbam Gulamjat Singh was visited at home by a few royal ladies who asked my father to allow Ibemhal to join the Jalakeli festival. My father, not a royalist, was not that keen, but had to acquiesce after he had been summoned by the Maharaj at his palace.

The Jalkeli festival was performed every summer, on a full moon day, at the Govindaji mandab of the palace. This day coincided with the celebration of Buddha Purnima or Buddha Jayanti (birthday). Govinda (cowherd) is another name of Krishna, who has 11 names, according to Bhagavat Gita.

Jalkeli is a part of Gouranga Vaishnavite *Sankritan* or story telling of Krishna and Radha in the Meitei Vaishnava religion. In Manipur, the Vaishnava Sankritan is performed by a male and a female choir (pala). The male tradition is called *Nupapala*, and the female tradition is called *Nupipala*. In Nupipala, the artists use the *kartal* (small brass cymbals) and sing and dance in a rhythm that enhances the stories of Krishna's pranks. It also makes it quite aesthetic.

Those selected women sing the kirtan, seated in circles, crashing their small brass cymbals rhythmically. They are accompanied by a couple of men beating their drums (Manipuri pung) to provide the foundation and the rhythm to the song.

A kirtan is a Vaishnavite devotional song that is carolled with a rising tempo, extolling the life of Sri Krishna and Radha. In the case of Jalkeli,

it recites their frolicking in the water of the Jamuna River in Brindaban. Once, the Nepali Maharani Ishwari Devi, wife of Maharaja Bodhchandra, took part as the lead singer.

Gouranga Vaishnavism is a sect of Hinduism with emphasis on Krishna as godhead. Krishna is the most popular Hindu god. His followers (bhaktas) enthral themselves with various make-believe stories surrounding Krishna, especially his boyhood horseplay with Radha and Gopis of Brindaban, all married women.



Bodhchandra Maharaj.

Krishna only became famous after the Mahabharata War when he was in his thirties. Until then he was a king of Dwarka on the western coast of Gujarat. His dialogue with Arjun before the beginning of the Great War is known as Gita (celestial song), the Hindu holy book.

Modern researchers say that the War of Mahabharata probably took place at Kurukshetra in Haryana, just over 2,000 years ago though Hindus would like it to be 5000 years old, Gita was inserted into the Mahabharata by an unknown writer only between 2nd and 3rd century CE. (cf. Authors Book, Quest Beyond Religion, pp 28, 29,187). It is now believed that Mahabharata and Ramayana are historical facts, and not religious scriptures.

The Vaishnavs love to enact a lot of shenanigans of Krishna (the 8th Avatar of Vishnu) with Radha and Gopis. Boy Krishna was so naughty that, when I was a boy, there were coloured calendar posters of boy Krishna stealing the clothes of Gopis while they were taking a bath naked in the river Jamuna, and he then perched on the branch of a tree, asked them to come up naked to collect their clothes. It is known as *Chur haram Lila* (stealing clothes of Gopis). This is interpreted as an allegory of pure bhakti and complete surrender.

Gouranga Vaishnavism originated in the Navdeep district of Bengal in the 16th century. Goura (white) short for Gouranga is another name for Chaitanya (conscious self). Chaitanya was a great mystic. After his wife died from a snakebite, he wandered all over the places associated with Krishna (*Tirth Yatra*). Tirth (Sanskrit = Ford) is a crossing place between human and divine. Earlier, his prayer gatherings in Navdeep became so loud and boisterous that, the then Moghul governor of the area tried to ban his cult.

Jalkeli festival and the Konung rewoke my memory of Bodhchandra Maharaj. I did not know him, but I knew of him quite a bit. The reminiscence of the Konung (palace) and the Temple mandab, though dwindling, still haunts my wistful memory. I went quite a few times to the palace during my school days. At one time, I was friendly with a son of Bodhchandra Maharaj, born out of wedlock [name withheld] from Leishangthem Leikai, Imphal.



Ibecha (Rani Kherdani)

Much later, I had the privilege of going to the palace building in the early 1950s. I had then access to some rooms at the back of the palace where the ranis lived. I then saw how the rooms were decorated and furnished, thanks to my cousin Yellangbam Ibecha (Rani Kherdani, 6th Rani) from Yellangbam Leikai, Imphal.

Many years later, in November 2010, it was a pleasure to meet the titular king Leishemba, along with my daughter Anita, her husband Martin, my son Neil and my wife Margaret at his palace. And again, in November 2013. We found him to be quite congenial and intelligent, keeping the decorum and dignity of a titular monarch. We wish him well as a keeper of Manipuri culture and customs, and a unifier of hill and valley people, while functioning as an MP for Rajya Sabha.



Maharaja Leishemba Sanajaoba Singh and Neil Singh Irengbam. Sanakonung.

During our second visit, we noticed visible signs of neglect of the palace by the crass ineptitude of the ruling Congress Government at that time. The palace garden was decayed. Litter and dirt were piling up everywhere, while the building needed fresh paintwork. Seeing the distressing state of the tattered royal flag on a pole, fluttering agonisingly in the palace compound, my son Neil donated some money to Leishemba to buy a new flag.

While recollecting the former glory of the palace, I can still see the carriageway leading from the north main gate into its low brick-walled compound. It was neatly surfaced by crushed red brick chips with a

couple of small fountains with sprinkler nozzles by its sides, which brought the water to life. The tiny open Durbar Hall was located on the west side of the estate and near the north gate.



A small Durbar Hall inside the Palace compound, Imphal. Girls walking, wearing Jaipur cotton shawls – a treat for young girls at Yaoshang.

The main building was painted off-white with some coloured features. At the back of the palace building, there was a quadrangular ornamental pond and a paved space. A few steps up from it led to the main building, where the ranis lived.

The southern side of the palace compound was bounded by the Thangapat (moat) that used to have boat races. There was a road with an unmanned gate leading to a few small bungalows in the south of the main building.

The East side was walled up while on the west, the palace was limited by a footpath on the bank of the Imphal River. This footpath branched off from the main road to Nongmeibung, near Sanjenthong (bridge) and it connected with Bamon Leikai, passing by the Kabui khun and Mahabali Umang (forest).

The main gate on the north side, pre, post and during WWII, was

guarded by armed Manipur police, known as State Military Police(SMP).

On the south side, an SMP sentry was posted by the main building of the palace. SMP was replaced by the 1st Manipur Rifles Battalion after independence and during the Chief Ministership of MK Priyobrata in 1949. Gurkhas (Gorkhali) from Shillong were recruited. Meitei senior NCOs were retained like Jamadar and Subedar.



Rani Kherdani (6th Rani) at her residence with Author, Margaret & Neil
November 2019.

More recently, it made my day, when my wife, son and I went to see Rani Kherdani at her residence in November 2019. She was great and still charming. We appreciated the afternoon tea with sandwiches served without crusts by her adopted nephew Elangbam Priyobrata and his wife.

Priyobrata is a likeable young man with an easy-going deportment. He is full of praise for his aunty and remains indebted to her for his growing up. He has earned his reputation as a lecturer in Manipuri language and literature, at the prestigious DM College of Arts in Imphal, and being elected as the General Secretary of Manipur Shahitya Parishad.

Bodhchandra Maharaj (1908-1955) was the first son of Churachand Maharaja and his second wife *Chingakham Shyamasakhi*. He had two brothers, Priyobrata and Khedasana, and a stepbrother known popularly as a dashing Captain Joy. He succeeded his father as king of Manipur in September 1941, when his father abdicated the throne.

Bodhchandra's Coronation was delayed till December 1, 1944, due to WWII. He was greatly admired by the British during the War, as he stayed put in Imphal at his palace. It was he, who successfully argued against the slaughter of cows for food during the Japanlan.

Bodhchandra Maharaj had an unfortunate reign. It was only for 8 years as de factor ruler, from September 1941 to October 15, 1949. Even then, during WWII (1942-45), his administration was taken over by the British Army. Then, after the War, he ran into difficulties because of the emergence of neo-liberal politicians in Manipur.

A dustbowl of disappointment was opening before him, especially as Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, known as the Iron man, the Deputy Prime Minister of India, began to integrate more than 550 Princely States in India, most of them voluntarily, and some by force.

On September 21, 1949, Bodhchandra was coerced to sign an Agreement to merge Manipur with India, in Shillong. On October 15, 1949, the Government of India took over the administration of Manipur and appointed a *Dewan* to run the government. That was the end of Bodhchandra Maharaja's hopes and dreams. His spirit was broken. He realised his life was only an illusion of forward progress that was stopped halfway by the unkind events of history.

He had no more ambition in life. His life without a purpose was a life without destination. He had nowhere to go. He had nothing to look forward to the next morning when he got up. He was naturally very desperate and depressed.

A feeling of loneliness enveloped him as his royal functions and appurtenance had been stripped off. While his mind was blank, bereft of introspective insight, he sought solace in wooing young girls to be his escorts, to give him some spark in his otherwise prosaic life.

Bodhchandra was born under a bad sign, quoting William Bell: *“Born under a bad sign since I began to crawl. If it wasn’t for bad luck, I wouldn’t have no luck at all.”* He went for a bit of schooling to England with his younger brother Priyobrata but did not like it and returned home. Priyobrata had also to return. He spent some time at a school in Raipur in Madhya Pradesh, now Chhattisgarh. He was not born to be an academic.

He loved sports but was not good at anything. He started a game called ‘cycle hockey’ in 1946, but it fizzled out. I went once to see him play at a playing field that now belongs to All Manipur Sports Association near the Mapal Kangjeibung. It was later given gratis to the Association in 1961 by the Chief Commissioner GM Raina at that time.

Later in life, he played volleyball on Sunday evenings in winter, at the volleyball ground, located by the Cheirap-Panchai Courts and near the Maharani Bridge. Although he played only as a server, he was motivated enough to play the game, drawing big crowds. I have a lot of empathy for Bodhchandra. He was certainly not our answered prayer as a king.

Several storylines have emerged. The most moving part was the way he ended his life as he gradually became depersonalised. As a young Jubraj, he was exiled to Benares for three years by his father for being naughty.

His first marriage was a failure. He married *Rampyari Devi (Tharendra Kishori)*, the third daughter of the Raja of Borokhemji in Ganjam district of Orissa on July 5, 1929. She was divorced in 1941 without an issue and died on March 20, 1942, in Benares [Cheitharol Kumbaba, Manipuri Shahitya Parishad, Rep 2015 p 680].

MK Binodini, the greatest and handsomest modern royal of postwar Manipur, eulogises Rampyari in her book, *Churachand maharajgee imung*. She probably had difficulty in adjusting to the Manipuri way of life. She remained introverted and had temper tantrums, often taking recourse to hunger strike.

Bodhchandra married again to a Nepali princess, *Ishwari Devi*, eldest daughter of Prince Ramraja of Ramnagar of the then United Provinces, now Uttar Pradesh. They were married in Benares (Varanasi) on June 18, 1941. She was installed as the first Queen of Manipur at the palace Durbar Hall on April 18, 1942.

Ishwari Devi gracefully, performed the funeral rites of her husband. She contacted the then Chief Commissioner of Manipur for permission to cremate Bodhchandra Maharaja at Kangla which is the Indian Government Reserve. She had no issue either.

I remember how Yellangbam Ibecha became the 6th Rani Kherdani. One day I went to her house, where I found Bodhchandra Maharaja posited himself as the suitor at her Mangol (Veranda) that was temporarily screened up. Bodhchandra had an earlier wife, *Sangai rani or Kamalavati*, who gave birth to his son Okendrajit. He was 5 years old when he was declared the king of Manipur after the death of Bodhchandra in 1955. The rest is current history.

Bodhchandra has forever been ostracised by some, for his part in signing away Manipur to merge with India. It is a matter of opinion and I think it unfair. To begin with, the Manipur Congress Party was campaigning for it. Little did people know that the Assam Governor Sri Prakasa 'made an offer that Bodhchandra couldn't refuse': either he signed it or else, someone would sign it as king of Manipur?

There was no mention of where he would be going thereafter. Probably in a prison somewhere. The intimidation was glaring for everybody to

see. His Redlands Residence with him in it, was ring-fenced by a battalion of the Jat Regiment of the Indian Army.

Before we write him off as a supine or spineless king, we should ponder over the thornier question of what we would have done if we were in his shoes. Little Manipur would have been integrated to India in any case by force, as it was in the case of Hyderabad, a large state that was merged with India in September 1948.

One may recall what the ailing Sardar Patel in Bombay, simply hinted to Sri Prakasa when he went to meet him about Manipur's political issue in 1949: "Isn't there a Brigadier in Shillong?" We know what he meant. There was a battalion of Garhwali Regiment already stationed near Kangla.

Filled with remorse and self-flagellation he renounced the sybaritic reality. He embarked on a self-imposed exile at the foothills of Nongmaicheeng. Having spent some time in meditation and self-examination, he returned to his palace, but stayed in a thatched hut, especially constructed for him.

It was located just outside the main palace building and on the northern side of Govindaji Temple. It had only the basic amenities. There, he breathed his last on December 9, 1955, at a young age of 47. He died of heart attack. I was at that time at college, doing my BSc.

The funeral cortege of Maharaja Bodhchandra was very poignant. The open jeep carrying his coffin to the crematorium at Kangla was followed by some artists from the Rupmahal Theatre, reciting an eloquent dirge: *Chatloko Athouba, Puk phaba, Dharma chenba inningthou...* [So farewell O! King, the brave, the benevolent and pious ...].

It is my sincere conviction that, future professional historians will see him in a different light and vindicate his actions as an inevitable step in Manipur's history. And this was not the end of Manipur.

